

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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## Summer Steelheading in Washington

Mention steelhead fishing and most Northwest anglers think of cold winter mornings, wet snow, ice-clogged rod guides, numb fingers and cold rain dripping down the back of the neck. It's true that winter steelheading and all its associated miseries—and *thrills*—are an important part of our way of life here in the Evergreen State, but it might be news to some people to hear that there is another kind of steelhead fishing available here, one that doesn't require long underwear, wool mittens or hooded parkas to help make it reasonably enjoyable.

If you would love to hook a big, chrome-bright, hard-fighting steelhead, but aren't sure it's worth freezing to death for, then summer steelheading is for you.

Like their winter cousins, summer-run steelhead spawn in Northwest rivers from mid-winter to spring. The difference is that summer fish come into the river several months in advance, often arriving in May or June, more than six months before they spawn.

Summer steelhead fishing is becoming more and more popular in Washington, and it's easy to understand why. Better weather is only one of the things that summer steelheading has going for it. For one thing, this kind of steelhead fishing is a lot better

suited to family fishing trips than is winter fishing. The kids are out of school during the summer, so the whole family can take a week off and enjoy the challenge of steelhead angling together.

The summer-run steelhead's fighting ability is another important factor in its popularity. The winter-run variety is no slouch when it comes to giving a fisherman a run for his money, but summer fish are the undisputed champs when it comes to fighting. A hooked fish will race up and down the river in a series of bursts that will keep even an experienced angler guessing, with blazing runs interrupted often by twisting leaps that carry the fish four feet out of the water. It isn't unusual for a hooked summer steelhead to jump a half-dozen times before it's finally landed.

It's the warmer water of summer that makes the fish such active fighters—a typical Washington river may be 10 to 15 degrees warmer in July than in January.

Water temperature and the fact that a summer steelhead may be in the river six months or more before spawning make these fish more active feeders than their winter-run counterparts. Scientists have shown that adult steelhead don't necessarily have to eat to survive during their spawning runs into freshwater, but summer fish are a

lot more likely to feed than winter-runs. And when they feel like grabbing a snack, nothing is going to stop them. Unlike the often light, hesitant strike of a winter fish, a summer-run tends to slam a bait or lure with all the subtlety of an MX missile, making it easy for even the novice angler to tell when a fish has come to call.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the summer-run steelhead's popularity has been the expansion of its range by the Department of Wildlife. The simple fact is that there are more places to catch summer steelhead now than there used to be, so more and more anglers are discovering this fantastic fish without having to drive long distances to do so.

The Green River, between Seattle and Tacoma, is a good example of how the department's steelhead management strategy has brought summer steelhead to the masses. There were no summer steelhead in the Green until 1970. Summer-run fingerlings were planted in the river that year, and adult fish from that plant returned in 1972. Anglers now catch hundreds of summer steelhead from the Green each year. It has been one of the state's top 20 summer steelhead rivers for each of the past several years, sometimes giving up as many as 3,000 fish in a single summer season.



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And there are many other examples of how well summer steelhead stocks have taken to rivers where they didn't exist or existed only in very small numbers before. The Snoqualmie and Skykomish rivers have become respectable summer steelie streams in recent years as a result of hatchery efforts, and both are extremely popular with the thousands of fishermen in the Seattle-Everett area.

Two rivers on the Olympic Peninsula have also gone from non-summer steelhead streams to fine producers. Sport-catch records show that the Calawah River gave up only eight summer-runs in 1978, while the Wynoochee River produced only 12. The first returns from Department of Wildlife hatchery plants appeared in both rivers in 1979, and anglers have been making good catches of summer fish from both ever since. In 1983, the Wynoochee was the state's tenth-best summer steelhead producer, with a sport catch of over 1,000 fish, while the Calawah was in the top two dozen with a catch of nearly 500 summer steelhead.

Efforts by the Department of Wildlife to provide more and better summer steelhead fishing haven't been limited to the west side of the state, nor have they been limited to rivers where summer-runs didn't exist before. Hatchery efforts have increased returns in some upper Columbia River tributaries to what they were in the "good ol' days" and to a lot better than they ever were in at least one other.

The Snake River system produced some great summer steelheading back in the sixties and early seventies, but the fishing dropped off noticeably in the mid-seventies, as man's "progress" really started to take its toll on the great runs of wild fish that had provided the fishery. The wild runs still have some serious problems, but the department's Lyons Ferry Hatch-

ery and other facilities in Oregon and Idaho have produced strong runs of hatchery steelhead that have provided some excellent steelheading on the Snake and some of its tributaries the last few years. And anglers have recently discovered how to catch these returning hatchery fish in some of the big Snake River reservoirs, creating additional excitement for southeast Washington summer steelheaders.



The news has been every bit as good on the Methow River and in the Columbia directly off the mouth of the Methow. The two areas combined to produce a whopping 10,000 summer steelhead in 1983, more than ever before. The Department of Wildlife's Wells hatchery produces most of the fish that anglers take in the Methow/Wells area, and that facility has been producing more steelhead smolts and releasing them in better condition to help account for the recent excellent returns. In addition, conditions on the Columbia itself have been good for downstream migration of steelhead smolts, and the transporting of smolts around the downstream dams have also increased survival. Throw in an upward trend in ocean survival of steelhead lately and you get excellent fishing when the adult fish return.

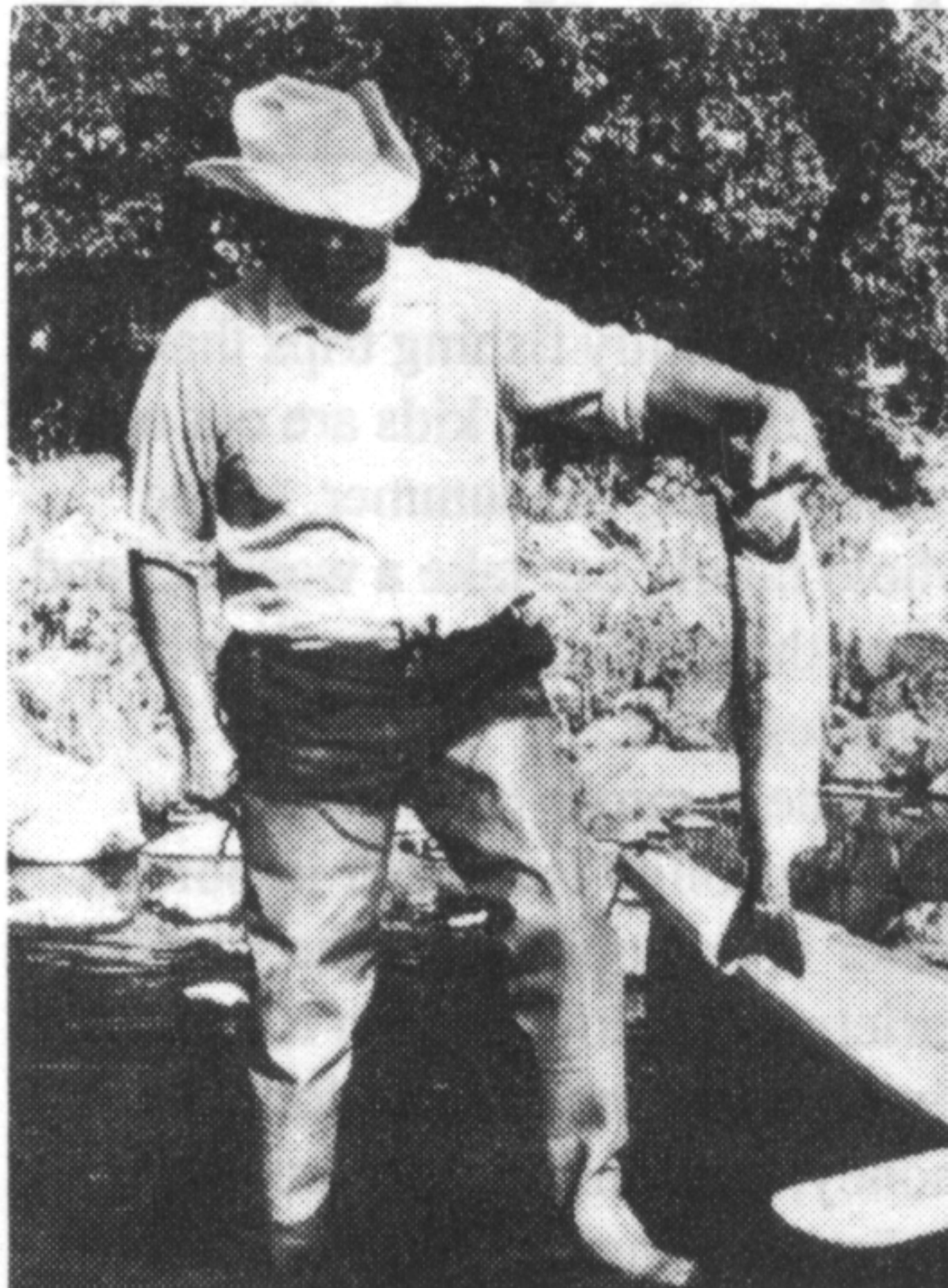
Between the streams that have hatchery fish, those that have wild runs and those that offer both, there are about 50 places in Washington where anglers have a pretty good chance of hooking a summer-run steelhead, along with several dozen more where it's a possibility. The top summer-run waters are listed on the next page. As you can see, there are good places to fish all over the state, from the Snake in southeast Washington to the Sol Duc near the northwest corner, and there are fish to be caught from these waters from May to November.

## Tackle Tips

If you have fished for winter steelhead or cast spoons or spinners for river trout, you shouldn't have any difficulty adjusting to summer steelhead fishing. The winter steelheader must tone down his tackle for the generally lower, clearer water conditions of summer, while trout fishermen should gear up so that their equipment will handle fish that may weigh 10 pounds or more. A typical steelhead rod is a seven- to nine-footer with a long handle, equipped with a spinning or casting reel that's large enough to hold at least 150 yards of eight- or 10-pound monofilament.

As for terminal tackle, get yourself a few dozen hooks in the #1 to #4 size range, an assortment of Corkies, Okie Drifters, Birdy Drifters or any other of the wide range of brightly colored little goodies collectively known as steelhead bobbers, a few spoons and spinners in nickel, copper or hammered brass finishes and a supply of sinker material. Some anglers prefer large split shot sinkers for summer steelheading, while others like 3/16-inch lead wire which attaches to the line by way of a short piece of rubber tubing.

Anglers catch a lot of summer steelhead on the bobbers, spoons and spinners mentioned above, but some



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fishermen won't go near their favorite summer-run steelhead stream without a good supply of natural bait. Clusters of fresh salmon or steelhead eggs and live ghost shrimp are the two top choices, but these fish can also be caught on nightcrawlers, grasshoppers, crawfish tails and other baits.

Although we're not going to get into the details of how to fly fish for them, anglers should be aware that summer steelhead also can be caught on fly tackle, with sinking lines and various nymphs, wet patterns and streamers.

The standard fishing technique for both winter and summer steelhead is called drift fishing, and it entails bouncing a bait or lure along the bottom until it bounces into the path of a cooperative fish. You cast slightly upstream and keep just enough tension on the line to allow the offering to drift downstream with the current. The key is to use a sinker that's heavy enough to stay near the bottom the entire drift without constantly hanging on the rocks.

As they move upstream, steelhead stop to rest in certain places along the

river. These "holding" places offer both cover and at least some protection from heavy current. It takes a while to get to know what good holding water looks like, and it can be different from one river to another or in different kinds of water conditions. As a general rule, don't look for summer steelhead in shallow, open water that provides little cover. Work the deeper pools, slicks behind and alongside rocks, stumps and other obstructions, under limbs and bushes that hang out over the water and along undercut banks. The fish often avoid bright sunlight, so fish open water early or late in the day and concentrate on shaded areas when the sun is high in the sky.

Anglers 15 or older need both a Washington fishing license and a current steelhead punchcard to fish for steelhead here. Youngsters under 15 and those older fishermen who may not need a fishing license are still required to have the punchcard, which is \$15.

If you've always wanted to catch a steelhead, but didn't want to battle the cold winds of winter, summer's

the time to try your luck. There's probably a river near you that offers good fishing, and you can expect the action to hold up well into the fall. Get out there and see what warmweather steelheading is all about.

## TOP SUMMER STEELHEAD WATERS

Upper Columbia above Wells Dam  
Upper Columbia at Ringold  
Kalama  
Cowlitz  
North Fork Lewis  
Snake above Lower Granite Dam  
White Salmon  
Methow  
Columbia below Bonneville Dam  
Skykomish  
Columbia above Dalles Dam  
Elochoman  
Green (King Co.)  
Klickitat  
East Fork Lewis  
Little White Salmon  
Okanogan  
Snake above Lower Monumental Dam  
Walla Walla  
Washougal



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